A HAPPY and lethargic week has just ended. The critics have slept sweetly and peacefully. There have been no heartburnings, no emotional disturbances, no angry Billingsgate. In fact, the placid, unruffled surface of things dramatic has been so enjoyable that one could almost be excused for wishing that no new plays would ever be produced again. Nothing but a pallid little comedy-skit-farce called "Marriage," by Brandon Thomas and Henry Keeling, has crept into New York, and it caused no distress. Not a critic tore his hair about it or delighted to bark and bite on its simple account.

You can't imagine how restful such a condition of things really is. It is Utopian in its saccharine ideality. You see, critics will look upon the theatre as a matter of life and death; as a grim and a grinning necessity, without which the wheels of the universe would cease to revolve. Of course this is due to the pettiness of the critic's ego. The theatre is a necessity because he is paid to go there and write about it. I suppose men in other walks of life have the same deplorable ego-mania. The ice-cream brewer doubtless looks upon ice-cream as the staff of life, and the undertaker assuredly attaches more importance to a hearse than to a brougham or victoria. It is all due to a myopic point of view.

The day will arrive when critics will realize the fact that the public doesn't care a hang, or a fraction of a fig, for erudite analyses of pretty bits of fiction, or for Addisonian essays upon the mimic world. These are read by the few, and perhaps scrap-booked, but they are going out of fashion very rapidly, and twenty years from to-day they will not even exist. In the next century every critic will be forced to cut his hair, and those who wander into the playhouses with skittish manes tickling their shoulder-blades will be laughed at and perhaps egged. As for those violent contentions that are now carried on critically, the bitter denunciation of all that is light and gladsome, the absurd booming of leaden playwrights and wooden actors, because they cater to our dark side, why they will be as dead as Marley was, to begin with.

It is all too serious, this jolly, good-natured, life-giving, relaxatory theatrical business, and this gloom is all due to the egomania of the critics, who misunderstand their duty. Let me tell you a little story. It's true. When Charles Frohman produced "John-a-Dreams" at the Empire Theatre, a dramatic writer, to fortune and to favor unknown, sought out the manager after the performance and approached him seriously. There was assault in his eye, and his nostrils dilated homicidally. "This play is an outrage!" he cried. "How dare you produce it? Your theatre should be closed up, and if I can assist in its closing I will. I am beside myself with rage and fury. I—I really cannot speak for indignation."

The little manager who had invested his money in the play smiled. The indignant one left the theatre, personally foaming, and next day—we all got up, breakfasted, went about our business, dined, and visited perhaps this very playhouse. Why on earth any critic should worry himself ill because he doesn't like a play, is more than I can imagine. Yet some of them, I am convinced, pass sleepless nights when "Art" has been outraged, and Virtue has not triumphed. Whenever an un-virtuous heroine is permitted by her playwright to marry and live happily ever afterward, you can bet your life that at least four critics are laid up ill abed the next day. Isn't it silly? Isn't it incomprehensible? Just fancy borrowing troubles from the playhouse, where you go to relieve your enchanted every-day-ness, and to laugh or to cry as the case may be. Let the critic pitch in and roast, without any personal agony, and then go home, eat a little Welsh rabbit, and forget all about it. This suggestion is pure philanthropy on my part. I hate to think of a man wrinkling and growing prematurely old from a mistaken sense of duty. Let him use Chimmie Fadden's philosophy when his angry passions rise.

That is why I say that this week's creamy inertia has been delightful. To-morrow night it will all be over. The dogs will delight to bark and bite. Duse will appear. Sarah's adversaries will up to champion her cause, and Sarah's admirers will up to smite them in the act. It will be very bitter, and it may be very amusing—to the few. The many who persist in adoring Bernhardt because she furnishes exquisite entertainment, and in patronizing Duse because in her own way she is equally delectable, will not feel even a tinge of interest in the critical warfare. It is all a question of "Chacun a son gout," which does not mean, as the little girl suggested, "Everybody has the gout."

Duse will undoubtedly attract considerable attention. She is not only a clever actress, but a clever woman. That idea of refusing to keep herself before the public by means of the interviewer, is almost Machiavillian in its studied diplomacy. "H'm!" said Duse (and if she didn't say it, let her deny it), "Sarah insists on telling the populace that she eats stewed prunes for breakfast, and always tackles a pork chop before retiring. I'll say nothing. I'll be original. They shall never know whether I sanction stewed prunes or not, and I will be hermetically silent on the subject of pork chops. They will go to the theatre and wonder. When they see my 'Camille' they will say to themselves, 'If we only knew her opinion of stewed prunes!' When they marvel at 'La Locandiera' they will exclaim: 'How wonderful! And to think that she has uttered ne'er a word about pork chops!'"

Of course its clever. It's original. Totty Coughdrop, before she appears, interests the people in her entity by discussing bloomers, and X rays, and the Eglau murder, and other meaty topics of the day, Duse holds her tongue. She sends word to the interviewer that she hates him. "If you were a king," she declares, "I would not see you. Don't try it again, I warn you. My personal representative will tell you all you want to know about stewed prunes and pork chops. Go and see him. Je ne m'occupe pas de toutes ces blagues."

And off goes the interviewer, impressed with a sense of Duse's mysticism. That's it—mysticism, the most amazingly potent word of the age. He thinks that she is mystic, because she wont talk stewed prunes. He imagines her sitting in her rooms at the Holland House gravely preoccupied with the sweet, etherial thoughts of an absolutely unique cerebellum. He takes her instantly at her own valuation. She must be mystic, because there is not an actress living who has hurled defiance at an opportunity to discuss stewed prunes pro bono publico.

It never occurs to him to picture the divine Duse in an ecstasy of glee at the success of her innovation—to think of her putting a dainty finger to a retrousse nose when she reads the various explanations of her eccentricity. Yes, Duse is not only a clever actress, but a clever woman, and her example will spread. Mlle. Trois-Etoiles, the famous exponent of the slack wire act, will soon shut herself up and grow mum on the stewed prune subject, while every song and dance artist will rush over to us with mysticism in the eye. It is a new school, that will be entertaining while it lasts. It probably wont last long.

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"Marriage," at the Empire Theatre, will appeal to people who enjoy bright dialogue. Those who are satisfied with froth minus substance will like it very much. Unfortunately Brandon Thomas tried to be a little more serious than he was in "Charley's Aunt." While you feel that his inclinations are strictly farcical, you can also perceive in "Marriage" that he has made an elaborate effort to get away from himself. He has called his new piece a "comedy," and he has tried to work it out on comedy lines, although it is roaringly farcical in its idea. Every time his farce flames have flickered up he has thrown comedy ashes on them, and this has spoiled what might have been an overwhelmingly hilarious entertainment.

The situation at the end of the second act would have made the fortune of any farce. It is capitally unconventional. Lady Belton, who has obtained a divorce from Sir John, meets him again. Of course she has loved him dearly all the time. That goes without saying. If she hadn't loved him dearly, why, "Marriage" would not be a play, but a chunk of real life, which nobody wants at the playhouse. He also loves her, and reconciliation looms before him. He writes her a reproposal of marriage, and the Hon. Dudley Chumbleigh carries it to her. In the meantime, however, the Hon. Mrs. Dudley Chumbleigh, upon whom Sir John is supposed to be very sweet, has so incensed Lady Belton that she indulges in tantrums that her ex-husband cannot endure. So he proposes to Mrs. Chumbleigh, who believes she is a widow. Lady Belton thereupon rushes out, with his reproposal in her hand, and announces her intention of suing him for breach of promise. We should have shrieked our ribs loose at the spectacle of a divorced wife suing her divorced husband for breach of promise if the situation had only been more farcically handled. As it was, we applauded Mr. Brandon Thomas's delightful ingenuity; but, as I said before, the ashes of comedy extinguished the farce flames, and we didn't laugh very much. It appealed to our intellect rather than to our spontaneous laughter apparatus.

Then this scene was played extremely adagio in a moonlit garden. The eyes of the absurd wife were—as Rhoda Broughton would say—sweetly moon-drenched. She posed before us as a sentimental heroine, and we declined to accept as an object for sentiment a woman so inane as to have secured a divorce without knowing how she got it, or why she got it. We thought her illogical, as we shouldn't have done if "Marriage" had been a farce. We were also annoyed at the stupidity of Mrs. Chumbleigh, who shook her husband by the hand and "looked into his eyes," and failed to recognize him because he had been away a year and cultivated whiskers. Extravagance, fire, intoxication, wit are the elements that go to make up farce. They do not constitute the essence of comedy. And don't imagine that I am treating you to a technical dissertation that you can't understand. If you go to the Empire to see "Marriage," you will understand what I mean in the twinkling of a bed-post. It will be the first thing that strikes you.

The dialogue of "Marriage," however, is as bright as a button, and that first act in Sir Charles Jenks's office, in Chancery place, is a gem. Mr. Frohman owns the best character actor in this country in J. E. Dodson. Dodson is an artist to the toe-ends (which is a little change from finger-tips). Every bit of business he introduces is acutely artistic. You see the famous old lawyer before you. You feel that you are in his office. You grow impatient at his legal eccentricities. You are quite as anxious as Sir John Belton to hear his opinion of the case. As he gives his instructions to his confidential clerk, answers questions at the speaking tube by his desk, and evasively responds to the anxious Belton, you say to yourself, "This is not acting. This is the real thing in all its unexaggerated, humorous realism." Dodson never over-acts. Dodson never watches the effect of his quaintness upon his audience. That is where his skill comes in. The supremest piece of character acting is ruined by one glance from the actor's eyes at his audience. It is instant death to the picture, but very few actors can resist the temptation. They nearly all do it. I can quite sympathize with the actor's ardent desire to see how he is going; to note with his own eyes the smiles he has evoked. Dodson, however, is quite beyond this vanity, and his entire success is, I believe, due to this fact. I have seen him do many clever things, but nothing quite so brilliant as this impersonation of Sir Charles Jenks. Art such as this elevates the stage far more than your hydraulic Vrooms, your blank verse Coppees, and your mortuary Maeterlincks.

Miss De Wolfe is a very pleasant figure in this play. Her principal charm is refinement. You see a gentlewoman when you look at Miss De Wolfe, instead of that horrible, nineteenth century vulgarity known as a lady. Gentlemen and ladies are monstrosities, that, thank goodness, are rapidly going out of fashion. I'd sooner be called a cad any day than a gentleman, and I should feel like duelling with anybody who dared to call my wife a lady. Miss De Wolfe is always a gentlewoman, and never a lady. Ladies and gentlemen are the exclusive property of East Side barrooms.

Miss Viola Allen plays a very bad part in "Marriage," and plays it very badly. She is becoming dynamitic as she grows older, and the evil of theatricalism is fastening itself upon her. I make these remarks in no unkindly spirit, for I'm exceedingly fond of Viola Allen, who is still the best leading lady that we have. Perhaps she will hark to a warning word. Perpetual enthusiasm is perfectly useless. Joseph Humphreys, another clever character actor, of the Dodson stamp, gives us a sketch of a confidential clerk that, in its small way, is a fitting companion picture to Dodson's work. It is artistically discreet and ingeniously conceived.

"Marriage," on the whole, was fairly well received by the critics. One gentleman, to whose words Mr. Frohman invariably attaches a vice-versa effect, cremated this comedy so completely that the manager is preparing to run it for several weeks. He told me so. "Whenever this gentleman praises a play of mine," he said, "I know that I'm in for a rank failure, and I call my company together to read the next play. As soon as I hear that my piece is ineffable trash, doomed to instant failure, I rest on my laurels and listen to the chink-chink of coin in the box-office. This rule never fails. My brother Dan and I call it our golden rule."

The author of "Rodion" and of Loie Fuller's serpentine) dances waxed quite enthusiastic about "Marriage." He not only declared it witty and clever, but remarked that "Two centuries ago a play like this, penned in Italy for the conventional masks of Italian comedy, would have succeeded instantly." A dash of such humor as this introduced into "Rodion" would have saved that play from its untimely fate.

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Maurice Maeterlinck is surely a dreadfully over-rated person if "L'Interieur," which was presented last week by the American Academy of the Dramatic Arts, at the Carnegie Lyceum, is to be taken as a serious sample of his handicraft. Nordau calls Maeterlinck a mystic muddler and a mental cripple, and I don't wonder at it. If there was one speck of value in "L'Interieur" I must frankly admit that I failed to discover it, although I examined it microscopically.

It's all very well to say that Maeterlinck doesn't write for the multitude, and to buoy yourself up with the fond belief that you are one of the delightfully fastidious few to whom he caters, but even then there must be a convincing something, an irresistible raison-d'etre. More unintelligible gloom can surely never be countenanced. The pessimist who bursts into tears at the sight of growing violets and wrings his hands in convulsive agony at the spectacle of the Lubins and Dulcineas indulging in their Sunday promenade on Fifth avenue cannot be a person to pamper and pet. There is something wrong with him. He is a case for liver pills and mineral waters, not for laurel wreaths and the pedestal of the mystic.

In "L'Interieur" Maeterlinck shows us the breaking up of an happy home by the sudden advent of misfortune. You see the peaceful family sitting at the window, and the departure of peace with the news that the eldest daughter has been drowned. Even in its domestic calm this family looks so hopelessly funereal that you feel that all its members are positively longing for a catastrophe; that they wont be happy till they get it. When the coveted catastrophe comes they rush out, and the curtain falls. It is all so trite and usual. Nothing is proved; nothing is demonstrated; nothing is offered to thought. It is an ugly living picture, framed in black crape.

"L'Interieur" was followed by a new farce-comedy, from the pen of Elizabeth Wailing, called "Master Shakspere Outwitted," and in this play Mr. Sarony's pupils were let loose. Some of them were just about to graduate; others were not. Asterisks on the programme distinguished the competent from the incompetent pupils. Miss Jessie Mackaye was perhaps the most engaging of these aspirants for the will-o'-the-wisp honors of the stage. She is a charming little lady, with a pretty ingenue voice, and a most agreeable stage presence. I rather fancy that we shall hear of her one of these days, and then we shall thank Instructor Sargent for his admirable services, for of course Miss Mackaye couldn't possibly have found her way to the stage without a course of lessons.

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John Drew can't tear himself away from New York. He tries to do so, but back he comes on a trot as soon as he hears that there is a theatre available. You can't blame him. We can't help being so nice. When we like a man we like him very profitably, and John Drew, with his well pomaded hair, his spasmodic speech and his refined manliness, is always sure of a shelter in the metropolitan bosom. He opens at the Garrick to-morrow night in "The Squire of Dames." A great misfortune has befallen that play. It was to have been presented by Charles Wyndham before the Queen, but at an inopportune moment Prince Henry of Battenberg died, and Her Majesty couldn't see it. Wyndham was dreadfully put out, and a reflection of his distress was of course felt by Mr. Drew. Probably Victoria's delight at "The Squire of Dames" would have helped Mr. Drew at the Garrick. Still, it is comforting to believe that if she had seen it she would have liked it. She likes everything that she sees, thereby teaching us all a needful lesson.

I'm in hopes that Drew will present Anthony Hope and Edward Rose's new play, "A Man in Love," which was tried in Providence some time ago. I hear that he will either do that comedy or "The Late Mr. Castello." It will be a bitter disappointment to me if Anthony Hope's work isn't staged. I'm one of Hope's most ardent admirers for everything that he has written so far has added a zest to life. Whenever I feel in the least depressed I read the "Dolly Dialogues." It is a tonic. "A Man in Love" is said to be a very slight comedy and a very short one. It has no complicated plot and no cut-and-dried situations. I have an awful idea that Mr. Drew's manager is a little bit afraid of it, but—well, we must hope for the best. "A Man in Love" is certainly blessed with a most attractive title.

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E. S. Willard has finally made up his mind to come to America next season. He needs an American season. He made a fortune here some time ago, and he has lost a great deal of it trying to run the Garrick Theatre, in London. He has harped persistently upon "The Professor's Love Story," which made such a tumultuous success at the Star Theatre when Willard was last in this country. He has worn it out. Henry Arthur Jones is at work upon a new play for this actor, and if it is not finished in time for production at the Garrick Theatre, where Willard's lease expires in June, it will have its first presentation in New York at the Garden Theatre. Willard will also bring over a new play by J. M. Barrie, author of "The Professor's Love Story," so that he will not be without novelties.

Willard and Hare are the only English actors who will venture to America next season. Tree is still coquetting with "Trilby" to such an extent that he can think of nothing else, and Alexander can't very well bring over "The Prisoner of Zenda," of which we have already had two good meals. As for Wyndham, who comes to America religiously—by cable—every time he sniffs a dollar on a new play, he has been crowded out by John Drew, who has already made known his "Squire of Dames." Unhappily, the play—and not the actor—is the thing. What the public wants is new plays, and, incidentally, good actors to interpret them.

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Miss Loie Fuller, who got a "la" to her name in France—you can't get la's for love or money in this country—is going to pirouette and serpentine at Koster & Bial's this week. I wish I could tell you that she had forgotten how to speak English, for I know you would appreciate her more if I could. From all I hear, Miss Fuller speaks good American just as well as ever, and knows her New York pretty thoroughly. Let me beg you not to judge of her harshly for this. It isn't her fault that she wasn't born in London or Paris. When you come to think of it, it is a big achievement for a small, unaided woman to have set the capitals of two countries all agog with enthusiasm. Those who believe in patronizing native articles (and if I can credit the "Constant Readers" and "America Lovers," there are millions of them) will have an excellent opportunity this week. The vulgar question of Miss Fuller's salary I shall not comment upon. I had my little say on that question when Yvette Guilbert flung her $10,000 in our faces. Nobody cares a snap how much Miss Fuller receives—or, nobody should care. The fact that she is an American who went abroad and grew a reputation should be enough to attract attention in the first instance. Then it will be a mere question of whether we like her, or whether we don't.

ALAN DALE.